

The Piaseczno Rebbe
and the Conscious Community
David N. Gottlieb, PhD
BJBE Symposium 2022

Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira (1889-1943)



Key Questions

- What is holiness?
- How and why should we look for the divine if concepts of God are alien to us?
- What happens when we do this?

Brief Biography

- Descended from Hasidic masters
- Educational theorist
- Rabbi of Piaseczno (suburb of Warsaw), 1909
- Established Da'as Moshe yeshiva, 1923
- Moved to Warsaw at outbreak of World War II
- Rabbi of the Warsaw Ghetto, 1939-1943
- Buried manuscripts in the Ghetto prior to deportation. These were discovered after the war
- Perished in Trawniki, Autumn 1943

Key Concepts:

- Sensitivity to the Holy
- Importance of emotional openness in spiritual practice
- “Everything is, essentially, divine.” The *immanence* of the holy
- The importance of looking for God
- Perceiving the holy by slowing down
- Reduce the amount of energy devoted to worldly pursuits

“We exhort you in the strongest terms: teach yourself to watch. In general, become a person who looks for God. Perhaps in your looking you will uncover God’s subtle presence—you may sense His holiness. When you seek Him, you will surely find Him. And where will you find Him? In yourself and in everything around you.” (Conscious Community, 39-40)

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“Learn to observe your inner states with deep deliberation. If you do not develop the tool of attention, you will be completely unaware of everything that transpires in your soul . . . in truth, the only tool you need for this work is attention. This is already enough: learn to slow down and examine every sensation that passes through you. By doing this, you are actually examining the inner structures of the heavenly plan as it evolves and interfaces with your existence.” (45)

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“The whole world and everything in it is divine in origin and substance. It is not visible to my eyes, but God is the source of all reality; even I am full of God. The sand under my feet is an articulation of God. The whole world is utterly comprised of, and dependent on, God. Now I, of my own free will, have come to think of myself as a free and independent agent; I have exiled myself from the presence of God.” (51-52)

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“Why would we work so hard to expand and develop our consciousness? Our mind is able to imagine all manner of physical objects: people, houses, trees. When we perfect this capacity, will we suddenly be able to sense the presence of God, even with our current physical limitations? . . . We find this stumbling block whenever we strive for growth and change: it is very difficult to move beyond our habits . . . (16,19)

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“ . . . [Y]ou need to imagine that you are the only person alive, your actions have no impact on anyone, and there is no one you need to please. You must never devalue what you yourself know and feel to be true in order to accommodate the whims and wiles of modern culture. Live as if your actions are the repayment of a loan. Even when your actions do please and help you fellows, it is all part of the payment plan. You are indeed obligated to give aid and comfort to those around you, but not for any ulterior motive. Allow yourself to sense the urgency within . . . If you make this a regular practice, your heart and soul will be guided by a powerful will. You will sense what is needed in each situation. Your deeds and your perspective and all your interactions will be full of the truth and power that emanate from your innermost self. You will be willing and able to rise to the occasion and be a constant and devoted servant of God in everything you do.” (60-61)

Practices and Concepts:

- **Hashkatah (Quieting)**
 - **Observe thoughts**
 - **Slow down**
 - **Repetition of phrase from Torah**
 - **Ask for help with a specific issue or character trait**
- **Coping with negative or distracting thoughts**
- **Engaging with deep feelings**
- **Acting “as if”**
- **The body as obstacle, the body as instrument**

“These are the initial steps to becoming a spiritual person. Then, a capacity for spiritual vision begins to shine within, allowing you to see “the sacred beauty of your light – shining throughout Creation” in everything you see. These flashes of vision may be fleeting at first, but each event will be more pronounced, becoming more frequent over time. In the end you will not remain a [person] of dust but become a [child] of the world to come, while yet alive in this world”
(100)